
I am given a laminated ticket, my mobile phone is taken away and I'm escorted to the basement of the New Wing of Somerset House in London. Formerly the Inland Revenue's staff gymnasium and rifle range, this almost-bare room now features a large architectural installation: a steel-framed box with waist-high wooden walls and windows that stretch up to the ceiling. In this vitrine, PJ Harvey has set up a studio for her new, as-yet-untitled album and, for a four-week period during January and February, the public has been coming in to view the recording process in real time. 'I hope people will see the attention and the labour and care that goes into making a recording,' Harvey said before the project began.

Harvey has always been interested in the connection between music and visual art. She was offered a place at London's Central Saint Martins to study sculpture, but turned it down when her music career took off in the early 1990s. Although she has carved out a place at the forefront of rock, with eight best-selling albums and world tours, she has continued to paint and sculpt, exhibiting at the Lamont Gallery in London and at Bridport Arts Centre. The idea of turning her recording process into 'a mutating sound structure' – titled *Recording in Progress* – emerged out of a collaboration with public-art commissioning body Artangel and the cultural hub of Somerset House.



PJ Harvey,
photographed by Seamus
Murphy, 2014

Lucy O'Brien

Music

PJ Harvey records a new album in public

Some critics have dismissed Harvey's installation as just another form of music-business marketing, creating an 'event culture' spectacle at a time when record companies are finding it increasingly difficult to sell albums. Director of Somerset House, Jonathan Reekie, says that this is 'complete nonsense. I don't think Polly [Harvey] needs publicity stunts to sell her albums. Where and how she makes a record is very much part of the process. She clearly thought about the environment she wanted. It is deliberate, not random.'

Part of the attraction for Harvey was the historical resonance of Somerset House. Once the home of nobility, the building straddled an inlet of the Thames so that barges could sail directly inside; Oliver Cromwell's body lay in state there after his death in 1658, bringing Britain's short period as a republic to a close; and the Tax Office was based there until the late 18th century. This resonates with the new album's dominant themes of water and death, the movement of refugees and effects of civic regulation, and the attempt by governments to impose order on our lives.

The overriding question with this project is: does it actually reveal anything about the laborious realities of recording music? We, an audience of approximately 40 people, stand watching Harvey and her musicians through one-way glass. It's like the gorilla cage at London Zoo, though instead of bamboo and straw, this one is filled with trailing wires and instruments. There is an old piano, a drum kit, five saxes, a trumpet, a French horn, two guitars, assorted African drums and a legion of mikes. A large chart is stuck to the wall with a list of songs and copious notes written in red felt-tip pen. Back in December, in conversation with

Artangel's co-director Michael Morris, Harvey wondered if the situation might make the musicians self-conscious. Today they seem slightly nervous. The fact they are all dressed in smart-casual black raises the question of whether there is a dress code and if they are on their best behaviour.

Harvey sits very still – eyes closed, listening intently – while the musicians and producer, Flood, sing the words 'da la' over and over again with a slow rhythm. When they finish she says: 'It breaks my heart. In a really good way.' Everyone laughs. 'I just find it really moving,' she adds, and then glances at Flood. 'It sounds like the right amount of people?' Everyone in the box is wearing radio mikes, and their voices are piped through to the audience. They can't hear us, but we can hear them. We are free to walk around the brightly lit structure and observe it from a number of angles.

In one corner stands John Parish, Harvey's collaborator since she was an 18-year-old art foundation student at Yeovil College. At the other side of the box are Terry Edwards (who has played with musicians ranging from Yoko Ono to Madness), saxophonist Mike Smith (Gorillaz member and long-term arranger for Damon Albarn), and Mick Harvey (soundtrack composer and former Bad Seed). Flood, meanwhile – who has produced U2, Depeche Mode, The Killers, New Order, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds and Sigur Rós – sits on a white sofa, issuing instructions with understated ease.

'Again from the top,' says Flood. 'It's just the second line in

the last verse we need to improve.' The musicians sing the part again. And again. The briefest of looks are exchanged; they move from mikes to instruments and laptops. 'We want two flutes and a trumpet. Could that 'F' be picked out by a brass part?'

Now the focus is on Edwards's baritone sax. He sends out raw blasts while Harvey listens through headphones, nodding to the instrument's deep bass notes. He plays it one way, then another. 'If it's not interesting,' she offers, 'go back to what you did first. That grainy slap-backy type of thing.' The musicians talk in textures. Sound for them is a physical material. Making a song is like a sculpting process, adding and removing notes until the shape is revealed.

As an audience, we can fill the empty space between song fragments with our imaginations. Just before Edwards plays his sax, we hear a slightly confusing melee. It sounds remarkably like the late Poly Styrene of British punk band X-Ray Spex shouting before she launches into 'Oh Bondage, Up Yours' (1977). If it is a sample of that moment, then Edwards's mournful sax is an inspired ghostly eulogy. Alternatively, it could be a song conveying the traumas of war experienced by global refugees, another theme Harvey has been exploring since her Mercury Prize-winning album *Let England Shake* (2011).

Harvey has always been responsive to the atmosphere of a particular space when she records, and the listening public inevitably adds another layer to the outcome. When our 45-minute slot is up, we file out of the basement slightly dazed. The audience consists mainly of Harvey fans. Some are already interested in the confluence between visual art and sound installation. Others have never set foot in an art gallery before, but want

to be part of her process. 'It gives you real insight [...] I like to think that, when we hear the album, we'll think back and know we were part of the recording,' enthuses fan Philip Barnes.

Back upstairs, the crowd line up to purchase memorabilia, but there's nothing as vulgar as a tour T-shirt. There are £300 GBP limited-edition Seamus Murphy photographs of Harvey in the catacombs beneath Somerset House and £50 GBP framed lyric sheets showing her elegant script broken up by scribbled notes. These prints emphasize the meticulous effort behind her songwriting. 'River Anaconda', for instance, has the phrase 'What will become of us' annotated with 'E flat min/ Em/F major/ D min/C maj HOLD'.

With this project, Harvey has shown that the working process can be as interesting to her audience as the finished album, the gig, the public presentation. However, it cannot be a totally realistic depiction of studio life. If the musicians are feeling a little inhibited by being 'on show', how much can they fully immerse themselves in the music? When musicians work in the studio, it is often a closed, intimate environment that involves a degree of sensitivity and trust. Will the presence of an audience mute the impact on record? We can only know that when the album is released.

For now, *Recording in Progress* works best as an artistic statement, and is another way that fans can connect with Harvey. It might even inspire one or two to pick up an instrument. As she says: 'The best part of any creation is the creating itself.'

Lucy O'Brien is course leader of music journalism at UCA Epsom, UK, and a writer and broadcaster.

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